



PAVRY, BAPSY CURSETJI

PAVRY, BAPSY CURSETJI (b. 1902; d. Bombay, India, 1995; A.V. Williams Jackson at Columbia University, at the same time as her brother, Jal Dastur Cursetji Pavry (1889-1985).

A former pupil of Queen Mary High School and St. Xavier College in Bombay, Bapsy Pavry was one of the first women to receive a graduate degree in Indo-Iranian languages from Columbia University (1925).

A.V. Williams Jackson wrote that both the Dastur's son and daughter had been his students at Columbia University – the former for four years, the latter “for some time” and that these “two devoted pupils” had helped to forge closer ties between him and “their scholarly father” with whom he had been in correspondence (Pavry, 1933, p. xiii). Bapsy wrote, in the “Foreword” to the manuscript of her master's thesis, that thanks were due to her “Guru,” Professor Jackson, and continued, “To study under him was one of my reasons for coming to America. Besides pursuing his courses in Avestan and the Literature of India and Persia, I have had likewise his guidance and help in connection with the preparation of this essay.” When Jackson and his wife, Kate, travelled to Bombay in early 1926, a letter written by Kate from the Taj Mahal Hotel dated 3 March includes heavily redacted lines which read, underneath the deletions, “Will's pupils Jal and Bapsy Pavry are staying here and their kindness has been beyond bounds. Last Sunday they and their uncle gave us a beautiful dinner at the Parsi club,” after which the uncle thanked the couple for their treatment “of the young people in America” (Jackson Papers, Letter 2).



A press photograph of Bapsy on holiday in Washington, DC, dated 6 January 1925, credits her as a protégée of “both the British Embassy and the Persian Legation.” Having completed her M.A. in June 1925, Bapsy travelled from New York to Britain in late July. The *Boston Daily Globe* column, “The Sidewalks of New York,” stated in its 2 August 1925 entry relating to her departure that Bapsy was “one of the most noted women of India,” speaking at least “12 languages” (Batchelder). In the academic year 1925/1926, Bapsy gifted \$50.00 for “Publications in the Indo-Iranian Series” (*Annual Report* part 2, p. 141).

Bapsy’s brother Jal left New York in December 1925, ostensibly to succeed his dying father as “High Priest of the Parsees in Bombay” (*New York Times*). In fact, Dastur Pavry worked at the Vadi [Dar-e Mehr](#) in [Navsari](#), and did not die until nearly two decades later. A letter of condolence concerning Dastur Pavry’s death, written to Jal by M. K. Gandhi on October 24, 1947, had been preserved by Bapsy and donated to the Gandhi archives (in Gandhi, p. 398).

The Pavry family was quite wealthy, with large estates in Baroda (*Indian Yearbook*, p. 1144), enabling Bapsy and Jal to spend the years after leaving Columbia University travelling extensively throughout Europe and participating in high society events. They had been received by the pope (Pius XI) in Rome in 1926 (*The Spectator*), and in August, 1928, Bapsy was presented to King George V and Queen Mary—one of the first Parsi debutantes—at the initial royal court of the year (*Pittsburgh Press*). From September 12-14 of that same year, Bapsy and her brother participated in the Geneva Preliminary Meeting of the Universal Religious Peace Conference: they were the only two Zoroastrians among 191 delegates, with Jal as a member of the Temporary Committee of Organization (*Geneva Preliminary Meeting*, 33, front matter). In the spring of 1929, a portrait of Bapsy by Augustus John (1878-1961) was displayed at the Royal Academy: an unprovenanced photograph shows her leaving a private viewing on 3 May 1929.

Bapsy’s master’s thesis formed the basis for an illustrated book, *The Heroines of Ancient Persia: Stories Retold From the Shāhnāma of Firdausi*, published in 1930. This text was referred to in a review by [Jarl Charpentier](#) as “a little volume of pleasant appearance” comprising an undertaking that might “fill a gap in existent literature, even if its future readers will perhaps be comparatively few” (p. 236).

On November 12, 1930, Bapsy was invited by “His Majesty’s Government” to attend the inaugural government reception for the first India Round Table



conference at Lancaster House (Hampshire Cultural Trust, WINCM:LH 5556.405). On a trip with her brother to Rome in 1934, Bapsy and Jal met Benito Mussolini and were later received by the shah of Iran, the king of Afghanistan and President Ataturk of Turkey (*Indian Yearbook*, p. 1144). In the spring of 1937 the Pavry siblings met the crowned heads of Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Italy, before visiting Hitler in Germany, and then the monarchs of Belgium, Greece, and Egypt: they were also guests of Emir Abdullah in Transjordan and King Ghazi bin Faisal in Iraq.

During the war years, Bapsy remained mostly in Bombay, at the (Parsi-owned) Taj Mahal Hotel (Fallowell, p. 90). After the end of the war, Bapsy accompanied her brother to the opening of the Paris Peace Conference on July 29, 1946 (Hampshire Cultural Trust, WINCM:LH 5556.473). Bapsy attended the launch reception for the Asian Relations Conference that met in New Delhi from March 23-April 2, 1947, hosted by Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister of India (Hampshire Cultural Trust, WINCM:LH 5556.482), and participated in various Indian Independence Day celebrations in the UK.

At age 51, Bapsy married Henry William Montagu ('Monty') Paulet (1862-1962), the twice-widowed 16th marquess of Winchester. The marquess was without children, and almost 90 years old at the time of his marriage to Bapsy at Caxton Hall, Westminster, on 3 July 1952. No friends or family were present on either side. Although Bapsy dedicated the 1954 Hutchinson limited edition of her book to her husband and to the memory of her parents, by then Henry had left Bapsy to resume his relationship with his former fiancée, Eve Fleming (1885-1964), the mother of the author Ian Fleming (1908-1964). In 1957, Bapsy sued Mrs. Fleming for enticement and won her case, but the following year this was overturned by a court of appeal. The marquess lived the rest of his life with Mrs. Fleming in Monte Carlo, and Bapsy spent her time between England and her family home, which was then Sunama House in Bombay's upscale Kemp's Corner, Malabar Hill, neighborhood. Bapsy and her husband did not divorce, and she continued to use the title of "Bapsybanoo (Lady Bapsy), Marchioness of Winchester," or "Bapsy Winchester" until she died.

Just as her father had made several important endowments, in keeping with Parsi practice, so Bapsy endowed several grants and fellowships, sometimes in conjunction with her brother, or in his name. A silver plate on display in the Guildhall of the city of Winchester, U. K., commemorates the donation of "Bapsy Banou and Jal Pavry," in 1972, of the Dastur Pavry Memorial Library to the Vaidika Samshodhana Mandala (an institute of Vedic Studies with an



Avesta section) in Pune, India (Hampshire Cultural Trust, WINCM:LH 5556.191). In the same year, Bapsy fulfilled a promise made earlier, to gift to the city of Winchester a full-length oil portrait of herself in her marchioness' state robes, which had been painted by the artist Frank Salisbury in 1956 (Hampshire Cultural Trust, WINCM:A.1232; vieweable online at <https://hampshireculturaltrust.org.uk/content/marchioness-winchester-frank-salisbury>).

In 1951, Bapsy and Jal had created a trust for Columbia University and frequently corresponded with the President's Office concerning their visits to New York, negotiations with lawyers relating to a gift to the university, and donations of books to the library. It was not until after Jal's death in 1985, that the "Dasturzada Dr. Jal Pavry Memorial Award for International Peace and Understanding" was established by Bapsy at Columbia University. This grant is still given each year to a student in the School of International and Public Affairs, who must submit a paper on the topic of the award. Bapsy endowed a second award with a similar requirement, titled "The Most Honorable Bapsy C. Pavry, Marchioness of Winchester Award in Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms." In 1992 Bapsy endowed two annual visiting lectureships at Oxford University (Fallowell, p. 96), titled the "Bapsybanoo Marchioness of Winchester Lectureship," and the "Dasturzada Dr. Jal Pavry Memorial Lectureship," respectively.

Bapsy had made known to the mayor, aldermen and citizens of Winchester in 1953 that she intended to make a bequest to the city. When she died in Bombay in 1995, her bequest of £500,000 became available to Winchester City Council, with the stipulation that "the money be used 'for erecting and providing either incorporated in or within the grounds of the Guildhall of the City of Winchester the public hall to be known as Bapsy Marchioness of Winchester Memorial Hall'" (*Hampshire Chronicle*, 12 December 2007). The bequest was accepted in 1996, along with nine boxes of Bapsy's personal papers, but the council was faced with the problem that there was no space in or around the existing Guildhall to locate a new structure. The delay in implementing the provisions of the bequest lasted for fourteen years, by which time the funds had increased in value to nearly £1.5 million. Finally, in June 2009, a room in the Guildhall was refurbished and renamed after her. Her life-size portrait now hangs imposingly at the front entrance to the "Bapsy Hall."



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